



# UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY AMONG TRIBAL AND NON-TRIBAL CHILDREN AND ADULTS

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## ABSTRACT

It has been observed that historical understanding (HU) is a cluster of various mental abilities, about which there is no substantial body of literature available (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009). In view of the problems and issues in the existing body of literature on HU, this study sought to explore aspects of HU in two cultural groups. Two studies were undertaken. Study 1 explored the developmental pattern of HU among 9-to-14-year-old children from two cultural groups- 30 Santali (a tribal community in India) and 30 non-tribal-urban children. The Test of Historical Understanding (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009) was used to assess development of HU in children, followed by an interview about their idea of history and past. The results showed significant effect of age and cultural groups on the test performance. In order to further explore the socio-cultural context of Santali children's HU, Study 2 was undertaken. It examined the notions of history in a group of 25- to 70-year-old Santali adults. Santali adults were interviewed to find out their notions of history, sources of their knowledge about past, and their trust on those sources etc. Their responses showed common culture-specific features. The HU of Santali adults was found to be mediated by their levels of schooling. The highest educated Santali adults showed most inclination and sense of community history. The findings of this study have implications for the teaching of history in a multicultural context, curriculum designing at elementary school level and social interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** Development of Historical Understanding; Culture and Learning; Learning of History; Culture and Cognition.

## Introduction

Development of historical understanding (HU) and the processes underlying such understanding are significant area of study with social and educational implications. History is a study of issues related to human life and society located in the past. Besides locating events in time, historians try to seek explanations, causes and connections of events/actions by following certain methods like direct investigation of facts/evidences, locating and connecting resources and their analysis to arrive at the historical facts. Understanding of history refers to the social and cognitive ability to process and make use of conveyed knowledge/information about historical events or situations. It involves ability to receive, comprehend, analyze and apply historical information, by using various social and cognitive skills. It has been observed (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009) that HU is not a unitary process; rather it is a cluster of various mental processes which follow somewhat divergent patterns of development.

In the past decades, researchers have focused on finding out improved methods of teaching history to enhance its understanding (Paxton, 1997; Rouet, Britt, Manson & Prfetti, 1996; Wiley & Voss, 1999; Wineburg, 1991). However, lack of theoretical integration makes it difficult to explore the cognition of History. Apart from a broad application of Piagetian notion of cognitive development; relating it to developmental patterns of HU (e.g. Hallam, 1970, 1967, 1966; Jurd, 1973), there is no other application of a consistent theoretical framework. Besides the lack of theoretical integration, methodological weaknesses in assessment of HU have also led to contradictory findings about its conceptualization and its development. Differences across different studies primarily relate to the period of onset of HU. Studies suggesting later development of HU (Booth, 1966; Hallam, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1997; Jahoda 1963; Stuart & Oakden, 1922) have conceptualized HU as an abstract understanding which evidently develops at a later-adolescent stage. On the other hand, studies suggesting earlier development of history (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Blyth, 1978; Culpin, 1984; Hall, 1980) have used concrete, audio visual material, or tangible experiences like drama or movies, to make its subject matter more concrete and facilitate students' responsiveness to historical material. Many studies have confounded historical knowledge with historical understanding (for ex. Booth, 1978; Hallam, 1967; Medley 1978). Most of the studies on HU have focused on separate domains of HU in isolation, ignoring the integrated nature of the different domains of HU (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009). Since the process of HU has been assumed to be unitary, studies in the area (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Blyth, 1978; Hall, 1988;) have not traced relative development of different dimensions of HU. In fact, differences in the findings of these studies are mainly due to variations in the assessment procedures and the assumptions regarding the concept of historical understanding underlying the test items. Some researchers have attempted to assess the ability to understand history clearly differentiated from historical knowledge. However, they have dealt with only one or two limited aspect(s) of historical understanding, such as time; chronology or causality etc. For example, Barton and Levstik (1996) have dealt with 'time'; Hall (1988) with 'object exploration' and Blyth (1978) with the 'oldness' of the objects. Such attempts at assessment do not provide an overall picture of historical understanding and its correlates.

In an attempt to trace the development of historical understanding, Dixit and Mohanty (2009) tried to deal with some of the above problems in the area of historical understanding. In this study four broad dimensions of HU were identified. These dimensions were as follows: Temporality: This dimension is related to the understanding of time, distance, and proximity of events in history and the relationship between past and history. This dimension has two sub-dimensions namely, Awareness of difference between present and past and Ability to link history to chronology. Causality: Causality refers to 'what', 'how' and 'why' modes of thinking about the causes of events or actions in history. In the present analysis, understanding of causality has been taken as: Ability to Relate Social Forces to an Event and Critical and Comparative analysis about events or phenomena by drawing upon imagination and to deduce inferences from the given facts about their relative importance in causing any event. Methodology: This dimension is related to various cognitive processes by which a reader or a writer of history engages himself/herself in the process of analyzing or appreciating history. It involves the following skills: Imagination of remote events and people; Perspective Taking; and Ability to Search for Patterns and Regularities in a series of events in history. Understanding the historians' job: This dimension deals with the analysis of sources of historical reconstruction and understanding the relevance and contribution of historians' mental processes in reconstructing history. More specifically, the abilities that can be seen under this dimension of HU are Ability to draw abstract concepts and information from concrete objects; Ability to analyze sources of history and Understanding history as interaction between Historian and his/her facts.

In order to arrive at these dimensions, views on history (for example, Braudel, 1980; Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1961) were analyzed in the study by Dixit and Mohanty (2009). In naming and determining the dimensions the focus was on major characteristics of history rather than seeking any exclusive category. No real historical episodes were taken in the test so as to minimize any effect of prior knowledge on the test performance. The findings revealed that understanding history requires various skills and abilities each of which exhibits different patterns of development. While some aspects of HU, such as Temporality develops by 9 years, other aspects such as Critical and comparative analyses develop by the age of 13-14.

Researches on everyday cognition show that our everyday cognition is inextricably linked to our socio-cultural context and cannot be studied in isolation (Schliemann, Carraher & Ceci 1996; Gauvain 1998). The social historical context, various symbolic and material artefacts, cultural tools, and human agency etc. interact in complex ways to produce the human thought process (Berry et al., 1992; Cole & Cagigas 2009; Gauvain 1998; Ratner 2000). A similar approach to analysis of HU emphasising its development in the cultural context should also be considered necessary and useful. However, as Barton (2001), in his review of research on HU showed, cultural context of HU is a neglected area in this field of research. He argued that cultural experiences can affect historical thinking in complex ways.

The present study was an attempt to explore the HU in two different cultural settings in India – the indigenous Santali cultural group, officially listed in Indian

constitutional system as a Tribal community) and another non-tribal group located in a nearby urban area. Two studies were undertaken. Study 1 aimed at tracing the developmental pattern of the HU in 9- to 14-year old children in the two cultural settings. Study 2 was undertaken for a more focused analysis of the nature of HU among the Santali adults to understand the culture specific notions of tribal children and adults.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### Participants

The study was conducted on Santali and Non-tribal children from the areas in and near the Jamshedpur city of Jharkhand state, India. The Santali children were from a residential tribal school, situated in Mango, around 30 km in outskirts of Jamshedpur city. The non-tribal children were from two government schools in Jamshedpur City. All the schools included in the study used same (NCERT) textbooks for teaching in elementary classes. The children from both the cultural groups, Santali and non-tribal, were from lower and lower-middle socioeconomic strata (SES) with a monthly family income of Rs15,000 and less. Both the cultural groups included three age-groups: 9-10 (Grade 4), 11-12 (Grade 6) and 13-14 (Grade 8) years. Five male and five female children were selected in each sub-group through a random selection method. The total sample size was 60 with equal numbers within each cultural and age groups.

#### The Test of Historical Understanding

The Test of Historical Understanding developed and validated earlier (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009) was used. The test assesses four broad dimensions, i.e. Temporality; Causality; Methodology and Understanding Historian's Job along with their respective sub-dimensions. The details of the test can be accessed in Dixit and Mohanty (2009).

#### Interview

Besides the Test of Historical Understanding, a semi structured interview was conducted with the children in order to get an idea of what and how do they think about history. Children were asked questions related to children's notion of past; their notion of past versus history; their source of information about the history; their idea of change in dynamics of society during a period of time; and their perception of authenticity of their textbook-history etc.

#### Procedure

After taking due permission from the authorities, children were individually contacted at their schools for the administration of test and subsequent interview. As a part of test administration children were asked to sort given pictures or respond to stories narrated to them. The student's responses on each item were recorded and the picture related performances were observed and noted down. For many of the items, additional questions were asked to elicit more in depth information about them. The administration of the test was followed by interview. The test was administered in Hindi, since the children normally transacted in Hindi and Santali. The entire procedure of administering the test and interviewing lasted for 60 to 90 minutes for each child.

#### Results and Analysis

The results of the participating children's performance on the Test of HU are given in Table 1, as mean scores and their respective SDs. The table shows that there is an increase in the scores of children with increasing age and grade. The ANOVA test on the scores of all the six sub-groups showed that there was a significant main effect of age group on the scores of HU  $F(2, 54) = 25.99, p < .001$ . Thus, the test results show significant improvement with age and grade. Interestingly, there is difference in the scores of children across the two cultural groups. These differences were found to be significant at .02 level  $F(1, 54) = 5.52, p < .02$ . The tribal children have outperformed the urban non-tribal children.

**Table 1**  
**The Scores of all the Groups on the Test of Historical Understanding**

| The sub-cultural group of the participant | Age group and number of participant | Mean | SD  |
|---|-------------------------------------|------|-----|
| Non-Tribal                                | 9 - 10 years (N 10)                 | 36.1 | 5.0 |
|   | 11 - 12 years(N 10)                 | 40.5 | 4.2 |
|   | 13 - 14 years(N 10)                 | 47.8 | 3.9 |
|   | Total (N30)                         | 41.5 | 6.5 |
| Santali                                   | 9 - 10 years (N 10)                 | 37.9 | 6.3 |
|   | 11 - 12 years(N 10)                 | 47.1 | 3.2 |
|   | 13 - 14 years(N 10)                 | 48.3 | 6.0 |
|   | Total (N 30)                        | 44.4 | 7.0 |
| Total scores according to the age groups  | 9 - 10 years (N 20)                 | 37.0 | 5.6 |
|   | 11 - 12 years(N 20)                 | 43.8 | 5.0 |
|   | 13 - 14 years(N 20)                 | 48.1 | 4.9 |
|   | Total (N 60)                        | 43.0 | 6.9 |

Apart from the statistics, a closer look at the content of the responses on each item and the interview show vivid difference in the notions and perception of history amongst the children of the three age groups and the two cultural groups. The content of the responses of the children across the two cultural groups varies visibly.

#### Developmental Pattern of the Different Dimensions of HU

The analysis of the responses of the children showed age and culture specific responses which can be described along the following lines.

**Dimensions showing early development (appearing between 9-to- 10-Years of Age).** The results showed that appreciation of a number of dimensions of history develops by 9-10-years of age. These children could demonstrate awareness of difference between present and past; linking history to chronology; causality; understanding history as an interaction between historian and his/her Facts. The 9-10-year olds could also trace patterns and regularities in a narrated story, but that was limited to the explicitly mentioned habits of people, not the abstract generalizations. This dimension was assessed through a story with a series of incidences about natives of a state and kings who came and ruled the state. Children were asked behaviours, which the natives of the state always showed and the behaviours which changed with time. The 9-10-year-olds mentioned traits like, 'people used to fight with each other', which was evidently mentioned in the story. By the age of 11-12, Santali children could infer pattern which were not directly mentioned. For example, children could infer 'the habit of people to change their views about the king' as a longstanding characteristic of people.

Thus, many components of HU were seen in the children between 9 through 12 years. The responses of children on all these dimensions were more rudimentary and described in limited vocabulary by the age of 9-10. However, as they grow older their explanations were more articulate.

**Dimensions showing late development (appearing by 13-14-years of age).** The search for patterns and regularities and critical and comparative analysis was shown only by the age group of 13-14-year olds. In the item assessing this dimension, children had to judge three important causes for a revolt, described to them. No child of 9-to- 12-years could list more than one correct cause of the revolt. In the age group of 13-14 years only 3 (out of 20) children have mentioned two reasons, rest all mentioned only one. These reasons for revolt were all mentioned in the story but the students gave only one of many reasons which, according to them, led to the revolt. Similarly, on another item requiring to critically compare the lives of two communities, migrating to a new place, the 9 to 10-year-olds could not show much insight. It was only the 13- to-14-year age group that showed an awareness of the conditional or contextual nature of human behaviour, in response to this item. Apparently, this dimension starts appearing after the age of 13-14- years. Children showed search for patterns and regularities only by 13-14 years of age.

Imagination about feelings of a person in past or empathy was exhibited only by the children between the 13-14-age-group. Further, the 13-14 age-groups showed variety in the way they expressed it. They used both, verbal and non-verbal expressions to describe feelings of the given person from past. It is known through the developmental literature that imagination itself starts developing very early in concrete operational stage. However, when it comes to implying it constructively in empathizing or mentally travelling to past, it probably takes 13-14 years to appear in children. Perspective taking was found in children of 11-to-12-years age. However, children of this age group considered the second/others perspective only when they were probed about 'the other side.' Later by the age of 13-14, children's responses readily showed consideration of both perspectives in question. Another dimension drawing abstract concepts and information from objects was assessed on the basis of drawing information about objects and situations in given pictures. The results showed that younger children could draw only visible similarities and connections in the given pictures, while the older children (age 13-14) could go beyond and infer implicit connectedness among the pictures.

These responses on the above described three dimensions support the earlier studies which substantiate late development of HU (Booth, 1966; Hallam, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1997; Jahoda 1963; Stuart & Oakden, 1922). The present study partially confirms the proposition of these earlier studies.

#### Dimensions showing cultural differences on test performance.

There were considerable differences in the performance of children on different dimensions, across the two cultural groups. Linking history to chronology was assessed by making children arrange pictures in chronological order and match them with correct dates. It was found that 9-12- year- old Santali children could do the ordering correctly but had difficulty working with dates. However, the 13-14 years age groups of Santali children did as good as their non-tribal counterparts, on items with dates. Such difficulty with dates can be attributed to the cultural context of these children where the representation of history is much in the form of stories and folk tales. The mainstream number system and calculations are not a part of the community experience. Most of the Santali children are first generation learners in their families, which make the number system difficult for them.

Critical and comparative analysis was assessed by making children judge the relative role of different causes in leading to an event, and critically comparing two different communities (a rich and a poor community who had to migrate from their settlement). On both the items the Santali children scored better. Also, the Santali age groups of 11-12 and 13-14 years gave more insight into the life conditions and challenges of living, of the two given communities. This understanding of stories and social dynamics in Santali children may be a reflection of the migrating community history. Santali being a nomadic community, they have more stories about moving from place to place. Also, this dichotomy of rich and poor is more vividly faced by the tribal children. Thus, Santali children's ability for critical thinking for historical situations was facilitated by their contextual experience. It was seen that responses on items which assessed empathy (or Imagination about past characters), had more to do with language and its articulation and emotional vocabulary. It was found that Santali children had lesser to say in response to the items which required them to talk about feeling state of a person. The 13-14-year-old non-tribal children score and respond more elaborately than their Santali counterparts. Another form of imagination was required to describe life in past. Santali children gave more diverse and rich response, again probably because of their background of folk tale and folk songs.

In response to the interviews children in both the sub-cultural groups expressed that their information about past primarily comes from the school curriculum and through their kin. The Santali children talked about things which were more like the ancient times of the mainstream history; early men, their life style, lack of resources and the hardship. They also reflected some disbelief in "Past". In other words, when asked, whether the stories about past are true or false, they could not confidently say that it was true. This could be a result of varied representations of history in their context. They read about a history in their text books, which is different from the history they learn in their community. Consequently, they remembered and reported information which were closer to their community experiences; early men, Stone Age and the pre-literate society. On the other hand the non-tribal children talked most about kings, palaces and British rule. They talked about all the different eras from the mainstream history. They also believed that history is true for sure. Thus, the non-tribal children who do not find any other historical narrative than their text book history, have learned and imbibed more of their textbook history than their Santali counterparts.

The responses of Santali children showed some overlapping features and many exclusive features in their HU. To further understand the cultural influences on Santali children's HU, another study was undertaken. This was done to understand Santali Adults understanding of history so that the cultural influences and strands emerging in children's HU could be more differentiate.

## STUDY 2

### Method

#### Participants

The study 2 was conducted in five different villages in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state. Twenty nine adult respondents - 17 males and 12 females were interviewed. The age range of these tribal adults was 25 to 70 years.

Santali society is an agricultural based society with strong cultural, spiritual and economic relation to the forests and nature. There were no written history and record about the Santali community until recent centuries. The information about Santali past and histories have been preserved and passed on through the generations by spoken word in the form of songs and legends. Most of the families send their children to the rural primary or higher secondary schools.

### Procedure

The Santali adults were contacted in their village. They were then asked questions about their past and history. Discussions were held regarding the earlier times; the lifestyle of people back in past, method of calculating time durations, their stories of past, and the authenticity of these stories etc. The educated tribal adults were additionally asked the difference between the textbook history and the stories passed-on in their community.

### Results and Analysis:

#### Notion of Past amongst Santali adults: Culture Specific features mediated by levels of schooling

The responses of Santali adults revealed prototypical features of their HU, common across all the participants. The beliefs such as that of, witchcraft, the essentiality of rituals, and the belief in the souls of their ancestors were very much a part of their everyday life, thus, reflecting their strong connection with their past. Santali adults expressed a sense of strong community history, separate from other sections of society. Interestingly, the pattern of responses had a concord with their level of schooling. It was found that participants with 0-5 years of schooling, which means they had no exposure to history as a separate school-subject (it is introduced in class 6 in Jharkhand and most of other states in India), showed a high level of trust in their cultural stories. Belief in spirits, magical thinking and witchcraft formed basis of their historical narratives. They were not sure its authenticity but trusted them because 'it has been known since long' and according to them 'non compliance to these rituals has lead to severe consequences in past'. Respondents who had 6-to-12-years of schooling (studied history for over 5 years) discounted their traditions and folk-tales. They explained that they did not find the knowledge about their community history useful in their

day to day life. These are the people who work as daily labourers or are jobless and as per them this folk knowledge does not get them jobs. They disregard their community history because they felt 'since it is not in the books, it is not correct' and even if they learn it from their community it is not helping them earn livelihood. Respondents who had graduation or a higher degree gave a detailed account of 'their past' which was based on folk-tales and folk-songs. They accepted that there are some myths but also believed that the folk tales hold clues to approximate the dates and locations of historical events. They expressed a sense of pride in their community history and said that it is not known or acknowledged by the members of the other community.

The study 2 corroborates the findings of an earlier study by Jervis et al (2006), which documented a curvilinear relationship between the Historical Consciousness and education in American Indian tribes. Among the respondents of 7 to 17 years of schooling, they found the historical consciousness to be highest among the highest educated people. The Santali adults who have received a graduate or post graduate degree are more inclined and attached to their history. They glorify their past including its myths and superstitions.

### Conclusion: Development of HU, Social Representations of History and Curriculum

The present study reveals that historical understanding is a continuous process which starts before the age of 9-10 and goes on developing after the age of 14 also. The dimensions which are relatively less abstract in nature, such as chronology, causality, imagination (for narrations), perspective taking, and understanding a historian's job, develop early by 9-10-years of age. It is important to mention here that by appreciating these dimensions of HU a child can easily understand the basic aspects of history. Although, understanding of the other abstract aspects of HU such as, empathy, critical and comparative analysis, placing imagination in historical context and drawing abstract information from artefacts, are crucial element of history. They are required to appreciate history with a more academic and analytical approach. There is continuity from the 'basic understanding of past aspect of things' to the more sophisticated understanding of societal and psychological dynamics of history. Many earlier studies (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Blyth, 1978; Culpin, 1984; Hall, 1980; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992) have demonstrated that children's understanding of history is helped by the concrete experiences and adult support. In the present study also some dimensions could be exhibited by younger children as they were presented in more concrete forms. Thus, teaching history in elementary classes can be made fun and enriching through such an approach to history.

The dimensions of HU showing cultural difference (i.e. Ability to link History to chronology, Ability for critical and comparative analysis, and Imagination) can be explained by the concept of "modularity" proposed by Cole (1992). It implies that different mental and physical exercises required in a culture lead an individual to develop the respective cognitive modules better than other cognitive modules. The children's approach towards history is also reflective of the social representation of history. Santali children reflected the beliefs that most of the Santali adults, with 0 to 8 years of schooling showed. They have come to have a sort of disbelief in their community history, owing to a different representation of history in their textbooks. As was seen in the responses of children, adults also have not found Santali narratives in their text book leading to a belief that probably Santali past is nothing more than story. Santali adults' and children's responses showed various culture specific features in their HU. Further, Santali adults' historical understanding was found to be mediated by their level of schooling, with the highest educated (graduate and above) and the least educated (0 to 5 years of schooling) showing strongest adherence to their community history. This reveals the mediating effect of education on the formation of historical understanding.

The implications of these findings are crucial for classroom teaching and social interactions. Based on the findings, it can be suggested that apart from considering children's preparedness to historical concepts, teachers should try to bring in the folk knowledge about history of different cultural groups in the classroom. Also knowledge about the cultural history of the communities represented in the class can help teacher to understand the cognitive domain on which children from those communities can perform better. By knowing the familiar cognitive modules of children, teacher can also help them improve on the modules on which they might have difficulty. Thus, the findings and implications of the present study can be crucial in designing and implementing history curriculum in schools.

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